

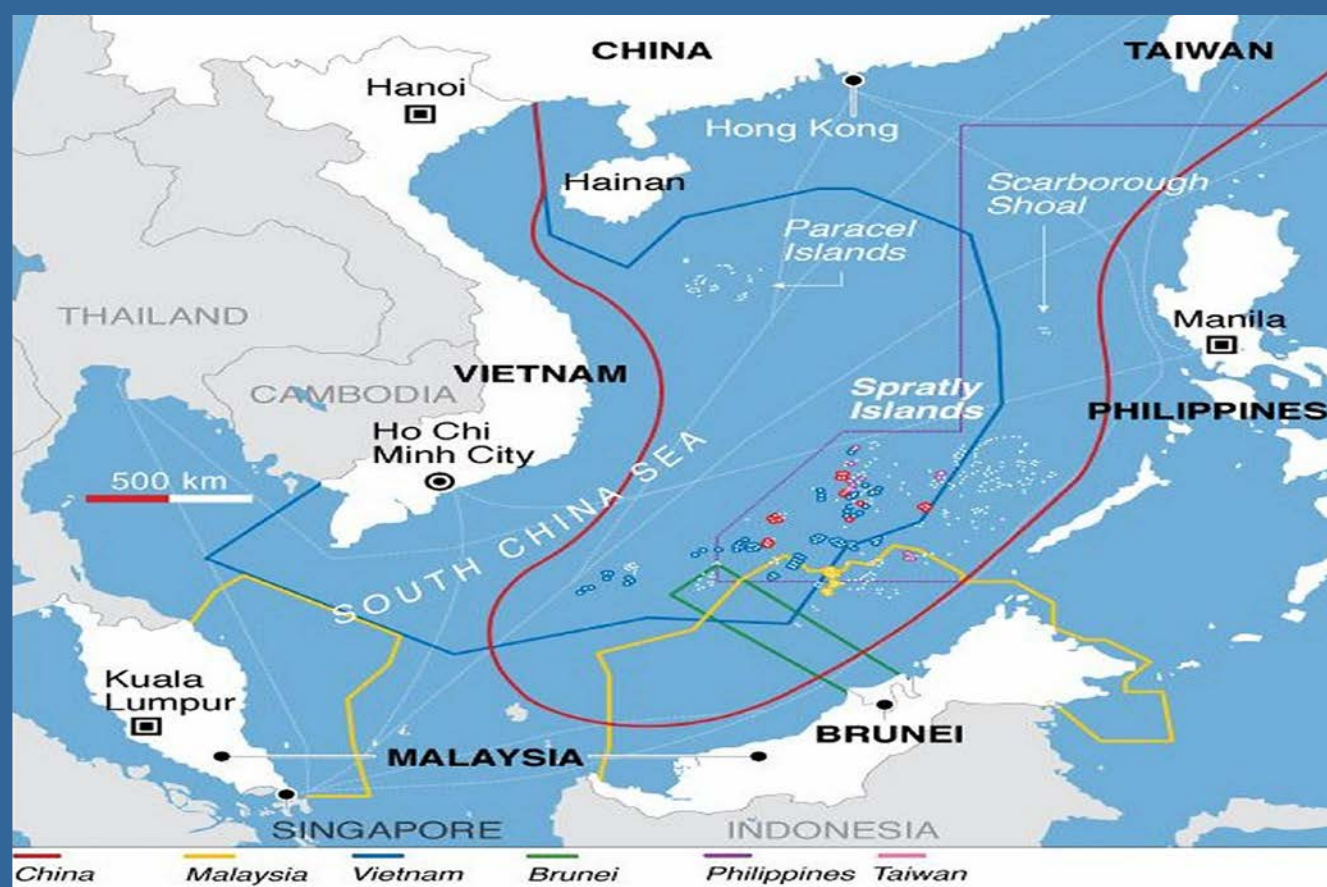


Making Waves: Recent Developments of the South China Sea Disputes

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❖ Abstract

A potential crisis of significant magnitude may be imminent on the rocks of the South China Sea (SCS), where state sovereignty and geopolitics converge. These tensions could increase the risk of confrontation, undermine regional stability, and damage neighborly relations. As observed by many, sovereignty disputes in the SCS entail more than simply who owns what particular geologic and geographic features. They involve fishing rights, shipping lanes, oil and natural gas reserves, maritime environment and security. These contested maritime zones have led to significant tensions in the region and great concerns for nations using the shipping lanes for international trade. These quarrels are also linked to rising nationalism in every claimant nation. Disagreements have proven difficult to resolve, despite decades of attempts to do so. At the heart of the dispute are ownership of land features and the types of rules to apply in resolving the disputes, because rules determine results. The continued tensions have restrained policies among nations involved, and made interactions difficult at times. To further complicate matters, nations have started to reclaim land to expand their control at others' expense. In a vivid way to demonstrate how dynamic the "status quo" in the SCS is, this paper surveys the latest developments in the region and analyzes different attitudes and responses from various capitals to actions in the SCS in recent years. Competing interests are investigated to gauge each claimant's strategies. Considering the complexity of overlapping claims involved, it calls for dialogue for a peaceful diplomatic solution.



❖ Key Questions

- To analyze the current situation regarding the South China Sea.
- To understand which nations are involved in territorial disputes.
- To show the different methods employed by claimant nations to defend their claims.
- To clarify the involvement of various foreign powers.
- To explain the hurdle these disputes pose for China's foreign relations.

❖ China's Claim

•At heart of Beijing's South China Sea (SCS) claims is the eleven-dashed line drawn by pre-Communist government in 1947, which included all the features in two groups of islands—Paracels and Spratlys—plus the Scarborough Shoal. Viewed as China's traditional sea boundary, the line forms the basis of both Taiwan and Mainland China's claims of ownership, but has not been recognized by the US or any neighboring states.

•Before January 2014, the Chinese presence in the Spratlys only comprised outposts made of concrete blockhouses perched atop seven coral atolls. Satellite images in late 2014 proved the impressive scale and speed of this extensive island building project. Outposts on stilts grew from these reef-based constructions to full islands, with two of them having lighthouses and three of them having airstrips.

•Recently, China has begun land reclamation and construction in the disputed areas. These efforts have been contested by claimants involved, and have caused tensions to escalate.

Disputes

❖ Malaysia: Passive and Cooperative, To an Extent



Premier Li Keqiang and Malaysian Prime Minister Razak, Nov 23 2015.

•Malaysia has chosen a nuanced approach, courting China while also planning for the worst. The Prime Minister has engaged in negotiations with China while acknowledging they have disputes with other neighbors. The Deputy Prime Minister, however, called for a more aggressive response.

❖ Philippines: Weak, but Vocal and Aggressive



Activists chant slogans during a rally in Manila, Nov. 12, 2015.

•The Philippines has had several clashes with China on its overlapping claims. Manila has sought adjudication on the nature of China's dashed-line claims from the Hague-based International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. Manila also requested American military aid in defending its claim.

❖ Indonesia: Confused and Muted



Chinese President Xi and Indonesian President Widodo in China, 2015.

•Unlike other nations involved, Indonesia did not know whether or not it had a territorial dispute with China. Its first action was to request clarification. It also expressed interest in following the Philippine lead, and was willing to seek arbitration on the matter. China stated that it recognizes Indonesia's control over the Natuna islands, but not clarified their position on the nations' overlapping maritime claims.

❖ Brunei: Quiet and Peaceful



U.S. President Obama with Brunei's Sultan Bolkiah, Nov. 22, 2015

•Brunei has been quiet about its dispute with China. It has acknowledged that the dispute exists but made no public effort to resolve it. This may be because Brunei lacks the military power to defend its claim, or because its claim also conflicts with those of Vietnam and Malaysia. Its ties to the United Kingdom and the United States have given Bruneians some security in the region.

Disputes

❖ Vietnam: Adamant and Armed



A Chinese ship uses a water cannon on a Vietnamese ship, May 2, 2014

•Vietnam's dispute with China has been the most violent. There have been several military clashes and numerous sunken ships. Vietnam has authorized the use of lethal force to defend its claim. Clashes over a Chinese oilrig in 2014 led to deadly anti-China protests in Vietnam. Recently, Vietnam purchased a navel ship from the United States, and has expressed support for the U.S. continued actions in the SCS.

❑ ASEAN: In Disarray

•As the actions of several of its individual members have shown, the ASEAN has proven unable to mediate this dispute. Because of the powers involved, the organization refused to make its yearly joint declaration regarding regional security, choosing to remain silent rather than let China force the issue's exclusion.

❑ Japan and Australia: Firm with the US

•Neither Japan nor Australia has territorial claims in the SCS; however, both have expressed belief in free travel through the region, and rejected the legitimacy of China's claims.
•The two nations are not willing to back down. This has allowed those directly involved to do the same, knowing that larger countries readily support their stance.

❑ US: Beijing's "Multiple Personalities"

•The US does not recognize China's claims in the region.
•It has expressed suspicion over Beijing's actions in the SCS. It has sent navel destroyers, bombers, and spy planes through the disputed region.
•The US has ties to every country China has a dispute with.
•Washington has repeatedly stated its intent to defend the "freedom of navigation" through the area.
•Finally, the US already has a strong military presence in the region, which China has been hesitant to engage in hostilities.

❖ Conclusions

The overlapping claims to sovereignty in the South China Sea contribute to tensions involving variety of stakeholders, with global political, military and economic import. It has become a stumbling block for China's regional efforts. As China's economic rise facilitates growing military capabilities, its neighbors are also experiencing their own rise in nationalism and military capability. Considering the complexity of overlapping claims involved, increased use of the contested waters by China and its neighbors augment the risk that miscalculations by sea captains or political leaders could trigger an armed conflict in the region. The security alliances could draw the United States into an unwanted conflict. America's traditional dominance and alliance structures in the region have heightened its role in the disputes. Violent conflicts benefit no players. For East Asia's security, prosperity and dignity, it is high time that policy community in various Asian capitals contemplates diplomatic solutions to prevent further escalation of the disputes.

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